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FOR

METHOD FOR MULTIMEDIA COMMUNICATION OVER PACKET CHANNELS

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METHOD FOR MULTIMEDIA COMMUNICATION OVER PACKET CHANNELS

BACKGROUND

5 In order to distribute and store multimedia data, the multimedia data is transmitted over a communication channel. Multimedia data primarily refers to audio and visual data but may also include other types of data. The channel is often subject to noise and interference, as in the case of wireless channel, and to congestion, as in the case of wired Internet, both resulting in loss of data during transmission.

10 Two methods can be used to combat data losses during transmission. Forward error correction (FEC) is a method of transforming the data message, represented by a sequence of symbols from a finite alphabet, by supplementing a parity data, another sequence of symbols, to ensure that if components of a codeword are altered, below some designated threshold, the original data can be usually extracted intact. FEC therefore
15 provides error resilience by increasing the amount of data to be sent. FEC does not require a return channel and is typically not adaptive to the current state of the channel. FEC does not guarantee that the data will arrive to the receiver without errors, however. A higher-level protocol implementing some form of repeat request for data that tolerates little errors is required for this to be addressed. Alternatively, in multimedia
20 communications the delay requirements often dominate the error-free transmission requirements, making error-free transmission a lesser priority.

Basic automatic repeat request (ARQ) is an alternative approach to assist in robust data communications. ARQ operates by dividing the data into packets and appending a special error check sequence to each packet for error detection purpose. The data packets
25 and error checks are communicated over a channel and the receiver decides whether a

5 transmission error occurred by calculating the check sequence and comparing the
calculated check sequence to the appended error check sequence. If a discrepancy is
found the error is declared and the receiver requests the transmitter using the return
channel to resend the packet by sending a negative acknowledgement signal.
If no discrepancy is found the receiver sends a positive acknowledgement signal to the
10 transmitter. To alert the transmitter of the error, ARQ requires two-way communication
channel to be present. Often, the return channel uses the same physical medium as the
forward channel, effectively expanding the data size because of retransmissions and
communication of control information. The difference between the FEC and ARQ is that
ARQ is inherently channel adaptive, since only lost packets are retransmitted, while FEC
15 typically adds overhead to all packets. Yet, ARQ may introduce significant delays due to
roundtrip propagation time and processing time. The last condition significantly limits the
application of ARQ to multimedia communications.

What is needed is a way to combine the two error control methods to improve their
performance for multimedia communications and to facilitate multimedia streaming
20 services and user playback experience.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

5 The method and apparatus described herein may provide improved channel bandwidth utilization for multimedia communications. According to one embodiment, the method and apparatus described herein includes an FEC and ARQ component, (which may be referred to as a hybrid automatic repeat request (HARQ)). The FEC component is used to protect the user datagram protocol (UDP) transported multimedia data against
10 channel fades and errors, and the ARQ component is used to ensure efficient channel utilization and robustness to errors in the return channel. As a result, an improved quality of multimedia can be obtained using the HARQ method compared to the conventional methods under limited channel bandwidth constraints.

 The method and apparatus described herein can be used for robust multimedia
15 communications over networks including wired (IP) networks, cellular packet data networks, wireless LAN's, power and telephone line networks, as well as many proprietary nonstandard packet-based networks. Incorporating a software and hardware support for the robust communication method and apparatus will facilitate multimedia communication applications including multimedia streaming, distant learning and mobile
20 video communications.

 In one embodiment, the HARQ system design is used on a packet erasure channel, specifically a channel that provides the locations of packets that had errors during transmission. A packet erasure channel is often implemented at the physical layer using cyclic redundancy check (CRC).

25 An exemplary diagram of transmitting packets, according to one embodiment, is presented in Figure 1. The media data 110 is packetized into a Group of Packets (GOP)

5 120. In one embodiment, the size of the GOP and the packet size are determined by the communication network being used and by the requirements of the application. For instance, a larger packet size may reduce the overhead due to headers of the transport protocols. On the other hand, the larger packet size may also lead to increased delays and inefficiency in high error-rate environments. The appropriate FEC code is applied to the
10 GOP to generate the desired number of parity packets per GOP 130. The GOP packets together with the parity packets constitute coded GOP (CGOP). In one embodiment, the number of parity packets is chosen depending on the tolerable delay, available bandwidth, and/or channel statistics. Additional considerations may also be considered. The parity packets are generated so that they can replace the lost data packets with little
15 or no overhead. In one embodiment, the redundancy packets may include the original data. The data and redundancy packets may contain any additional information, possibly in the form of headers, required for the overall system control and operation. In one embodiment, a GOP number, a packet number, FEC parameters and/or the packet sizes may be included in the packet.

20 In one embodiment, the parity packets are generated using the systematic Reed-Solomon (RS) codes, wherein the number of parity packets replaces the same number of (any) data packets so that the data can be decoded intact. Any other suitable FEC channel code may be used to generate the parity packets, such as Tornado codes.

The data is packetized, FEC encoded and sent from the transmitter 140 to the
25 receiver 150. The receiver determines if the transmitting data can be decoded. If the data can be decoded, the receiver sends an acknowledgement to the transmitter, which

5 terminates the transmission of any further redundancy for the current CGOP 170. The transmission is then decoded 180 and sent to the user 190.

The data and parity packets transmission order according to one embodiment is illustrated in Figure 2. First the data packets of the current CGOP are sent to the receiver 210. The data packets may be interleaved with the data, parity packets, or both from other
10 CGOP's 220. The parity packets corresponding to the current CGOP are then sent 230 until the acknowledgement from receiver arrives 240 or until the maximum predetermined amount of parity packets is reached or exceeded 250. In one embodiment, the data packets of the current CGOP are sent before the parity packets of the same CGOP. As a result, the data transmission and processing overhead may be reduced
15 when no packets from the current CGOP have been lost. In one embodiment, packets from different CGOP's can be interleaved to give the receiver enough time to process and send the acknowledgement to the transmitter.

In one embodiment, the receiver implements the GOP acknowledgement protocol, which sends an acknowledgement to the transmitter when the receiver can decode the
20 GOP data. The receiver implicitly asks for more parity by not sending an acknowledgement to the receiver. The receiver may send multiple acknowledgements for the same GOP. Multiple acknowledgments can be used when the receiver suspects that the first acknowledgement was (or can be) lost on the return channel.

In an embodiment using RS coding, the acknowledgement can be sent when the
25 number of correctly received packets exactly equals the number of original data packets. The acknowledgement can be sent before the actual decoding takes place to reduce the

5 overall latency. If all the data packets arrive without errors no decoding is needed and the data can be passed directly to the user application.

In an embodiment using Tornado coding, the acknowledgement can be sent when the number of correctly received packets equals the number of original data packets times some predetermined constant greater than unity. The latter constant is determined to
10 provide some desired probability of correct decoding and is determined for each Tornado code by a computer simulation. If all the data packets arrive without errors no decoding is needed and the data can be passed directly to the user application.

Several other acknowledgement mechanisms are compatible with this system. Acknowledgments packets include the CGOP number but may also contain additional
15 information. The additional information may be in the form of control messages to the server, channel statistics and/or other information. In the case of errors on the return channel, such as packet erasures, the transmitter simply sends the maximum number of packets allowed by the algorithm and continues to the next GOP. If after all the parity is sent the data is still not decodable, the transmitter continues to the next GOP. In an
20 embodiment using delay-sensitive multimedia information, the delivery time is upper-bounded so that the proposed solution can be used as is without adding an additional error resolution mechanism. One embodiment may define a higher-level error resolution protocol. The application can also be allowed to deal with the unrecoverable channel error situations.

25 In one embodiment, the proposed method and apparatus described herein is applicable to video streaming over IEEE 802.11 wireless LAN. At the UDP level, the IEEE 802.11 network acts as a packet erasure channel if the physical layer

10 In one embodiment, the profile of the communicating channel is taken into account to the FEC parameters (the number of data packets and the parity packets in a CGOP) and other characteristics of the method and apparatus described herein. In one embodiment a CGOP size and the number of parity packets may be chosen so that the integral number of packet erasures over the length of CGOP with a high probability is
15 less than the number of parity packets (for RS coding) or is less than the number of parity packets times some predetermined constant greater than unity (for Tornado coding).

In one embodiment, the method and apparatus described herein could be used for streaming of multimedia data over wireless IP network, from a streaming server to a receiving device. For example, one embodiment could provide the IP network with error resiliency while reducing temporal latency to improve proper playback of data in the streaming setup.

One embodiment could also be used to interface with media playback mechanisms. For example one embodiment may use the Intel ® Media Processing Library framework, such that the robust streaming is integrated seamlessly with the playback mechanisms.

Figure 3 shows the block diagram of one embodiment for streaming multimedia data over an IP network with UDP transport protocol. The multimedia data 310 consists

5 sending the ACK's back to the server side at the direction of the client control process
343. The I/O may also be used to send other control information to the server side. The
depacketizing and FEC decoding block 344 processes the data from the packet buffer
342. The depacketizing and FEC decoding block is responsible for correcting data packet
erasures and presenting the multimedia encoded data in a form that can be processed by
10 the following decoding block. The compressed multimedia data is passed to the API 345
for the decoding process through the decoding buffer 346. The API decompresses the
multimedia data and outputs it to the display 350. The client control 343 manages the
data flow between the three blocks described, controls ACK's and other communication
to the receiver.

15 The methods described above can be stored in the memory of a computer system
(e.g., set top box, video recorders, etc.) as a set of instructions to be executed. In
addition, the instructions to perform the method described above could alternatively be
stored on other forms of machine-readable media, including magnetic and optical disks.
For example, the method of the present invention could be stored on machine-readable
20 media, such as magnetic disks or optical disks, which are accessible via a disk drive (or
computer-readable medium drive). Further, the instructions can be downloaded into a
computing device over a data network in a form of compiled and linked version.

Alternatively, the logic to perform the methods as discussed above, could be
implemented in additional computer and/or machine readable media, such as discrete
25 hardware components as large-scale integrated circuits (LSI's), application-specific
integrated circuits (ASIC's), firmware such as electrically erasable programmable read-

